



Natomas Oral Histories

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Oral interview of

Bill Son

discussing the **Virgin Sturgeon**

June 21, 2010

Interviewers: Anne Ofsink and Randee Tavaréz

Transcriber: Anne Ofsink

Center for Sacramento History

551 Sequoia Pacific Blvd

Sacramento, CA 95811-0229

(916) 808-7072

csh@cityofsacramento.org

www.centerforsacramentohistory.org

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Bill Son was the harbormaster at the Virgin Sturgeon Marina.

Anne: It is June 21, 2010. Randee and I are at the home of Bill Son and we are going to talk with him about his relationship with the Virgin Sturgeon. So, here we go. We were talking a little bit about the items we have in the Virgin Sturgeon exhibit, like the article that Bill Silva wrote, and what happened to the Virgin Sturgeon. Who started the fire?

Bill: Which time? It sort of had a rough time. And I'm sure you heard the story of what got the Sturgeon II over on Broadway. She [co-owner Laurie Patching] went to get another liquor license in the lottery and she got it. Then they reopened this place. The barge that's there now — and I been there since 1985 and I think it was put in just a little before that — it's an old WWII navy LASH barge made out of fiberglass. It's very thick. It's the same barge that the Alamar Restaurant is made out of up the river. The only thing is, the Alamar is inside of the barge, and we're on top of it and our kitchens are down below. At the Alamar you're almost at water level. It gets rocking and rolling pretty good. In '86 I had my rope tied up to the front deck and we stacked pallets and put plywood on top of it so you could still walk out there, until it [the water] got into the electrical box. That is the top area up there that's probably 15 feet above the apartment[?] and 30 feet above the water level.

[00:02:05]

Anne: That's high.

Bill: Yeah, there were all kinds of critters coming by. They were building the new River Bank Marina, and big logs were coming flying by and we'd grab them. But, what do you do with them? We'd put it where we thought we wanted it. Then the water went down and it's still there.

A lot of people, including the curators of McClellan Field Aeronautic Museum, didn't know they had a dock here, next door, that's still there. When I was a young man, out from the back of McClellan, they would bring the airplanes after they sprayed them in plastic, and bring them down Northgate — that's why Northgate is as wide as it — and then onto the Garden Highway, and they'd swing them from the dock onto barges and float them down to San Francisco. These people around here didn't know anything about it. So if the guys out there want to do the same thing you're doing here — talk to me!

It's changed so much. I don't go down there because I worked the docks Friday night and Saturday night for probably 15 years. It got rough. I got knocked in the river three times in 15 years. I'm getting too old for that. All of the sudden, I can't stand to be around drunken sailors. In the 25 years I've been there, I jumped in the river and pulled out a Labrador retriever that was stuck in the docks; I grabbed a toddler that the parents didn't even watch that walked right off the end of the dock and out of sight. It's a great place to be, we have a lot of fun, but every once in a while, you get a boatload of visitors that come in there. The patrol boats have made a tremendous amount of difference. One year they lost eight people out there, between the mouth of the American and up where it turns around. Mostly from drinking. Of course, nobody wears a life jacket. That's not manly. Except me.

[00:04:41]

Anne: So you started in '85 over there?

Bill: I quit fishing commercially — salmon — I think '84.

Randee: So how did you get to be harbormaster?

Bill: There is a great story about. It has to do with Laurie and the other harbormaster. There was a dastardly deed that the harbormaster had to do that was really unpleasant. Back in those days, we weren't hooked up to any sewer system. We had this old 1500-gallon truck, which belonged to Caltrans before we got a hold of it. Twice a week or so we had to jump in that thing and haul it out to McClellan Field and dump it. We called it the Virgin Sturgeon Honey Bucket Express. I have a new T-shirt. I never wore it. Laurie thought it was great, "Oh, you get to wear this!" I said, "I'm not wearing that thing." It's brand new and hanging in my bedroom. If I can find it, I'll give to you. There were about six of us that remember that. This is about the time I met my wife. She comes from Chicago and she's a real estate broker, and all her brothers were — one's a pilot and all this. And here I am driving this poop wagon, for lack of a better word, just for something to do, because I was trying to help Laurie. The other harbormaster had that job, and he would let that thing get a little too full and get a little too messy and it got to where you had to empty it more than a couple of times, because business was improving. So Laurie was out there in her heels trying to pump that thing, slipped, and slid on her fanny down the levee. Her eyes turned red and steam was coming out. She says to me, "Do you want this job?" I said, "Well, I don't know, let's talk money." So we made a deal. I was supposed to do it on Friday night, on Saturday night, and maybe twice during the week for x amount of dollars. In the meantime, my girlfriend, who's now my wife, she's not telling anybody in her family that she is dating a guy who drives a potty wagon. Of course, I'm a mechanical engineer; I've got a full-time job besides that. But that's what everyone's going to remember. I'm riding back and forth for a romantic trip in the moonlight, in a poop wagon.

[00:07:19]

Anne: *[Laughter]* It's a great story.

Bill: You know how the story goes: The moon is bright, the night is blue, and down the alley the poop wagon flew. That's all I'm going to say even though there is a little bit more to it. So, anyway, before I forget my train of thought, that's how I got the harbormaster job — "Do you want this?" "Yeah." I kind of took it over and I cleaned out all the derelict boats they had in there. I made some decisions. I said, "If I'm going to run this, I'm going to do it my way or I don't want any part of it," and it's been that way for 25 years, even after Bob Riggs and his wife took over. It's been a lot of fun.

There are some funny stories about that [driving the poop wagon]. We had a maintenance man down there and he liked to drink too much. He was coming from the old Village Marina and it was about 10 o'clock. I was on the poop wagon. So, he's pulling up with this stuff, and he decided to scare me a bit. So, he cut me off, and in the process of doing that, he knocked the pipes off the side of my truck. 1500 gallons! I'm thinking, I'm going to be in jail for the rest of my life. What do I do? I'm not going to stick my finger in the pipe, you know. So I took off down the Garden Highway.

Randee: Oh my goodness, spraying it around?

Bill: What could I do? Run for the border before I get caught! We finally got that straightened out. That [job] was only supposed to last a year. So, two years later I'm roaring off the freeway to get off on Orange Grove and the left front wheel flew off the truck. I'm full! I managed to keep it right side up. One story leads to another. Finally, I drew the line. "Laurie you've got to hook this place up to the sewer." So she finally did it on the 4th of July. In fact, my son was 10 years old. He wanted to drive out there and grind the gears in that beat-up old water wagon that we had been hauling stuff around in.

[00:09:34]

But, to get back to the marina, the prices were lower than anybody else so we could keep it going. It was the last mom and pop operation hanging on in a bunch of rusty fleets, like that article said. It's still hanging there. In the winter, it gets really touchy because of the high water. But, we haven't had any for about five years. When the water is down like it is normally, there's almost 35 feet of pilings above it. In 1986, we were six inches from unhooking and coming off. The last big winter storm we had, five or six years ago, where it's now the Coast Guard Auxiliary Station next door — they had a big floating shop supported by four cables, and three of them broke. That was when we had the severe wind and it blew the river in the opposite direction. All day we were trying to keep that last cable from breaking because otherwise the shop would have smashed in front of the restaurant.

Anne: Right. Another story about [laughter]—

[00:11:23]

Bill: Oh yeah, a lot of goings-on. Then we had the guys who came in with the seaplanes. We did that once, a long time ago. We had a fly-in, but only float planes, not seaplanes. A float plane can come up to the dock, but the ones sitting in the water with the pontoons, they can't get in. So we had to let go of that. But it was great. They could fly six or seven at a time — that's all we could take. I still see one of the guys every once in a while who goes down to Discovery Park. He says, "If you want to get girls, buy an airplane. Just drive it up to a boat ramp and somebody wants to go for a ride." You see all kinds of things. We used to do that — I don't remember what they called it — like "anything that will float" race. They'd put in up above the American River and then you had to paddle down.

Anne: Kinetic Sculpture?

Bill: That's it.

Anne: Kinetic Sculpture is in that one piece [referring to the Virgin Sturgeon exhibit]. We have the plaque.

Randee: You should come down and look at our exhibit.

Bill: The other thing is the Opening Day Parade. It's always in the spring, for when the season opens. It was led by the *Elizabeth Louise*, a paddleboat, which is now working in Alaska. In fact, I did some welding on that boat when they were first building it. That was neat. I don't know if you saw any of the pictures of her houseboat — the gal that did it, we got first place with it because there was this huge gorilla with Laurie sitting in its hand. Like King Kong. It was fun.

Anne: Yeah.

[00:14:10]

Bill: The Halloween parties, you couldn't get into those. You could not get a [unintelligible]. A friend of mine had went to Red China. It took him six trips to get in with this family to build him a real Chinese junk, about 40 feet long. We'd load that thing up with black powder cannons and fire. We'd hit the deck on the Sturgeon. I always called the police department and said, "It's time, we're going to do it again." Always, five or six cars of cops would come down there, "Oh, it's you again." Those were the guns we were shooting up, right up there on the wall. They're meant to be loud, because I fill them with three times more powder that they're supposed to have.

Anne: What kinds of guns are those?

Bill: They're 50-caliber black powder rifles, pistols. That all went with the pirate costume, which I just gave away yesterday.

[00:16:52]

Randee: It's so interesting because it's been there for such a long time. A lot of restaurants come and go. And a lot of interesting stories. We did an exhibit on it. Laurie was so generous in loaning to us—

Bill: Of course, she didn't tell you about almost drowning with her husband on the way to Costa Rica? They had a huge Catamaran sailboat, probably 60-foot. They brought it through the Panama Canal and they were going to turn around the boat, around the edge, and take it up there and use it as a tour boat. They had two registered captains on board and they both told them, "You can't go that way. You have to go around and you can't go through." And they said, "Do it anyway." They broke the boat in two — the waves. I forgot the name of the town in Costa Rica, but they knew all the local watering holes, and this guy named Bubba, a captain on a fishing boat in Costa Rica, heard the Coast Guard call come through. I'd finally convinced them to put radio equipment on that boat. So they put out this call on this little cheap GPS that they had that I demanded they take, and this Bubba was in a saloon, half-drunk with his crew, and he says, "Come on, we're going fishing for Laurie and Jean." The Costa Rican coast guard radioed, "We don't have enough fuel to come and get you," and, of course, the U.S. Coast Guard could hear them, but they were way out — 300 or 600 miles off the coast. So, here was Bubba. By then, the boat's really bad and taking on water. So, Bubba's turned around with his fanny on the instruments and he's got a throttle in each hand, and he's backing his big fishing boat in as close as he can to them. They got in there and got a little bit of their stuff off. And Jean was really irate at the time because he lost his pair of Tony Lama cowboy boots, but they had their lives. I've got an article on it somewhere. It was close.

Randee: She didn't tell us any of that. She didn't get that detailed about her life.

Anne: She probably has a lot of stories we haven't heard.

Bill: And you're not going to hear. *[Laughter]*

[00:20:30]

Randee: You know Captain Jim?

Bill: My wife was one of the few women who was on that boat. We used to take a Christmas package to him. I'd take my banjo, Captain Jim played guitar. We'd drink cheap wine and go through all the Christmas carols everybody knew. Everyone thought he was a little bit *[unintelligible]*. He was a master

shipbuilder. That *Black Magic* [boat] — with all the dogs and cats and goats and pigeons — he built that. His brother was a space-science engineer for NASA. All the parts that they used to build the space equipment with came packed in teak wood crates — that's where the wood came from. And it's a copy of the Mayflower. We used to load him up a couple times a year and go down to the River Galley and dance. He was a great old fella. Finally, Crawdads, the other marina, decided they didn't want him. They paid him pretty good. He got him an outboard for his little skiff and motored off into Never-never Land, because he was fed up with people shining spotlights in there and looking, and all the drunks making noise at night. He went up to the Sacramento Slough above the Feather River. He was up there for a long time. Finally the old boat sank. Everybody liked him, so they all chipped in and bought him and old houseboat, so he lived up there a long time. Christmas Day, he and his other old crony went into Knights Landing to get groceries, and, coming back, some drunk came over the line and killed him and his friend. It was really sad. I don't know what happened to his dogs and cats. He would not even kill a mouse — he'd take it to shore and throw it in the bushes.

[00:23:06]

Anne: So, he made the benches and the tables at the Sturgeon? They have one left, I guess?

Bill: I think there is. It's all round.

Anne: I try to sit there when I go, if it's empty.

Bill: And she didn't pay him for it — that's the story from him. Then, the rest you have to fill in the blanks because — "Hey, I did the work, you didn't pay me, the heck with you," so the place caught on fire mysteriously one night.

Randee: Do you think he meant to burn the whole place down?

Bill: I don't think he was trying to burn the wastepaper basket up. This was a long time ago — before I got there.

Anne: We learned that when she was looking for a barge again the first time, they went down to Joe Alioto, down in San Francisco, and as it turned out, they ended up buying the Sacramento Yacht Club because a county near the Bay Area couldn't get the five permits they needed to go through all the county lines.

Bill: They went down and bought that for a dollar.

Anne: Well, because it sunk before they paid! And they said, "Well, we know how to raise this." And they did! We have all the photos of it coming up through the bridges. The other part I was going to mention, which is just kind of interesting, is that the current barge is one of the old Joe Alioto ones, but it was the Rio Ramaza.

Bill: The current barge now is a navy LASH barge made out of fiberglass. I don't know where she bought it from.

Anne: Well, she got it from the people up in Verona.

Bill: That's the same one as the Alioto. Same barge.

[00:25:34]

Anne: She said that it was an Alioto barge from San Francisco, which was ironic because they went down to get one initially and then ended up with that barge.

Bill: It's a World War II navy LASH barge. What they did with them is they filled them full of bombs, ordnance, explosives and all that, that's how they transported them around. They would set them up on the decks of the raiders, they'd pick them up. In fact, the lift pins are on the Sturgeon. You can still see where they lifted them up. It has huge doors on the bottom. Sometime when you're there, ask Bobby. If you walk down there and look underneath, you can see the doors and the decks are on top. They would stack these barges, lash them together, and they'd run pins down through them five or six times. It's very stable.

Randee: We'll take your word for that.

Anne: We heard the story about putting the Pan Am walkway on, and how they had to fill it with sand to do the [stress] test. And then they had to figure out what to do with the sand, so they loaded all the sand up into sandbags and put them in the bottom of the boat.

Bill: For ballast. So they had to balance it like that.

[00:28:05]

Randee: Seems like there's a lot of worry having a barge on the river.

Bill: They've been really lucky. We did have trouble with the super-high water that came up fast, with the debris — I'm worried about it going down underneath it. Same with the boat next door. There's about 55 feet between the two docks. I've seen them in there with a tugboat pulling logs and stumps out of there. I told the guys that were laying on their stomachs setting chokers, the big cables that go around the log, and then they pull them out one at a time and let them go down the river — I told them, "Be careful of rattlesnakes." They said, "What are you talking about, old man? You don't know nothing. Rattlesnakes in Sacramento?" I said, "Pay attention." All of the sudden, this guy who was laying on his tummy flies up in the air about four feet. This stuff is coming from Redding and they have rattlesnakes up there. The snakes don't jump off — they ride along with it. He put his hand right on a rattlesnake! All of the sudden, the old man wasn't as dumb as they thought he was! We could pull the debris out in the middle of the river and let it go. Bob Taylor, who had the service on the river at that time, he'd make \$1,000 on one log because it would stick in the next marina and then he'd go down and pull it, and then go down and pull it out of the next one.

Randee: Like that pontoon boat that lady had, and the logs would come down and get stuck under her boat there.

[00:30:03]

Bill: I've seen chunks of dock with yachts on it going down that river, and the current would be like 5 to 7 miles an hour. Unreal. Then we had this huge sailboat called the *Nam Sang*. Absolutely beautiful — 55-foot teakwood Class A sailing vessel that won the TransPac from Hawaii to Los Angeles in 1946. The guy that bought it, he was an idiot. This guy was renting this thing out. He had no skippers. He'd put 50 people on it and have 25 lifejackets. He was trying to work it out of the Virgin Sturgeon. I came in there one night, he had eight 55-gallon barrels of diesel and garden hoses running from our parking lot down over the lower deck and onto his boat—

[Recording cuts off, then resumes]

[00:31:14]

Bill: —takes the boat out with no insurance. And these people don't know that. They're out on this beautiful teak sailing boat with a mast that's 92 feet. I was sitting up there in the parking lot watching the high water, and I went down to check the boats, and I saw this guy heave anchor, and all the sudden, he's taking off in a 6 or 7 mph current. He's going fast — no sails, just on the engine. So he comes around the corner and there's the I Street Bridge. The water is within 3 feet of the railroad tracks. So they open the bridge—

Anne: 90 feet—

Bill: It's not enough. When the water's at 13 feet, people can get under. Not under the bridge, but under the electrical tower lines that ride above that bridge. And he snagged them — live electric wires with an aluminum mast. And of course, it tipped the boat over on the side. There was about six of them on the boat. We all went down and watched it. I got video of it. All the TV people were there.

Anne: And wasn't it there for a long time?

Bill: It's still there! They finally rescued them. They got mad at the fire department, "Nobody would come and rescue us!" You've got a hot line wrapped around an aluminum pole, and you want the fire department to come out there in their aluminum boat? Nobody got anything but a little wet. It's still there. It's dead behind the wooden structure where the bridge turned, so it's not in the channel. He had no insurance, zero.

[Recording cuts off, then resumes]

[00:34:15]

Anne: How would you change the docks?

Bill: We want to update them. We want to put in the new ones that are concrete boxes. To update the docks to current, I don't think anyone has got that much money. Originally, they were 80-foot telephone posts with a bunch of boards nailed to them. If you got more than four people on it, you got wet feet. So then they went to Styrofoam blocks and built a light super-structure over it. That's the inside dock, and that's why we don't use it much, because it's still that way. The outside dock is all new — nice big floats and steel structures.

Anne: When people could live there, they'd pay how much a month or something, and then they had water?

Bill: They had water and some electricity. But there were no tanks to pump the sewer out. Quite a few years ago they had pump toilets and just dumped it in the river. Of course, that changed. All the time I've been there, I've had people stay on their boats, but we have no live-aboards because we don't have pump-out facilities. So we just don't deal with it.

[00:36:17]

Randee: Are you still the harbormaster down there? You are, right?

Bill: Yes, I am.

Randee: So, what does that consist of? Do you have an office down there?

Bill: I carry my briefcase and put it on the best table I can find, and that's my office. I'm like an apartment manager. Every year, most of the people take their boats out. They have to sign a lease agreement and give me first and last month's rent. We charge \$5.75 a foot per boat, and that's cheaper than anywhere within 100 miles. We have no water and no electricity, because it's mainly a seasonal thing. I have about four boats that stay all year round. Most of the time people take their boats out, put them on a trailer, and take them over across the street to the Boatworks to store them, keep them dry.

[00:38:13]

Anne: I was thinking that the docks and the land is still Laurie's and that Bob just owns the restaurant.

Bill: He's responsible for the maintenance of everything on the docks. She owns the property. Since Bob and Renee took it over, they're getting a tremendous amount of boat traffic back that they didn't have for a long time, because bolts and nails sticking out of the docks were scratching up the boats. There was no money being spent for maintenance. That woman [Laurie] worked! She would be down there with a paint roller and going and going and going, and out there with a hammer and saws, doing the stuff herself. I've got to give her credit. She had a way with getting people to help her. I don't know if it was those blue eyes or not.

Anne: She's so nice! She's just a sweetie.

Bill: She's a sweet lady. She went through a lot. She just wouldn't give up. She'd keep going. Jerry Brown would hang out down there because she was working at the legislature at the time.

Anne: We've got a little story about him in there [the exhibit] and a couple pictures.

Bill: Hang on, he might be back.

Anne: Well, who knows. But we've got to get a picture of you.

Randee: Did you tell us the story — Laurie was on the dock fixing something, and these three guys got out and came up and helped her fix it?

[00:41:00]

Bill: I've seen her drive that truck I was talking about. She'd get in and go dump it. Then they closed it and we had to go clear to the county sewer disposal, which was way down almost in Walnut Grove. I spent all my time driving that thing.

Anne: We have a T-shirt of that and a photo of the crew in the exhibit.

Bill: There's a picture right there of one of the Halloween parties. This guy took first prize because he dressed up like me.

Anne: Oh, look at that. Excellent!

Randee: We like pictures.

Anne: Yes!

Bill: This is what I normally look like.

Randee: That's you? No, somebody dressed like you?

Bill: That's me. This guy took first prize because he dressed like me.

Anne and Randee: [*Laughter*]